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Shared Vulnerability, Divided Action: South Asia's Climate Paradox

IPCS Regional Workshop

May 2026 | Kochi, Kerala, India

Director's Note

This report, and the workshop it is based on, follow several years of work on the security implications of climate change conducted by the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) and the Clingendael Institute. Since beginning the project, two common refrains have emerged from across conferences and papers: one, that addressing climate impacts requires regional cooperation, and two, that climate offers the most obvious entry point for cooperation in South Asia. We decided to stress test these assumptions, in an effort to move the conversation substantially beyond “we must cooperate” to “what is required (and what is possible).” We did so by engaging decision-makers and experts from across the region and placing them in a simulated regional negotiation. Our thinking was that such an exercise would reveal behavioural and institutional constraints that may otherwise be invisible in conventional policy discussions.

We found that while climate change is increasingly recognised as a shared regional concern, the political and institutional conditions necessary to address it collectively are limited. The gap between the transboundary nature of these challenges and the national orientation of policy-making is of significant consequence. While the gap cannot be resolved, it must certainly be acknowledged, and where possible, reconciled. Climate cooperation is also embedded in the wider context of South Asian geopolitics. Regional attitudes and sensitivities inform how states approach even those areas where interests ostensibly converge. In addition, material asymmetries mean that states can have different climate priorities even when they face similar, or sometimes the same, problems.

What, then, does regional climate cooperation need to look like to function within South Asia's realities? Our workshop discussions clarified the tension between designing cooperation around what is politically feasible versus doing so around what climate risks may require. Designing around political feasibility may make cooperation easier to establish, but could also constrain the functions that would make a regional mechanism useful. Designing around what climate risks require could result in more ambitious arrangements, but it also raises the chances of running into the same political sensitivities that have historically limited regional engagement.

This report offers nine observations that South Asia's decision-makers could use to evaluate whether new institutional designs are able to respond to the demands of climate change while accommodating regional realities. I am grateful to the experts we convened in Kochi in May 2026 for their thoughtful contributions—which form the backbone of this report—and to my IPCS colleagues, Ashutosh Nagda, Fiona Raval, Dr. Muneer Ahmed, Prerana Priyadarshi, and Tapan Bharadwaj, for distilling and shaping those contributions into analytical conclusions.

Much like the workshop, the process of producing this report reflects the kind of cooperation our discussions sought to examine.



Ruhee Neog
Director, IPCS

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“ The international rule-based order is broken. In this context, regional co-operation is increasingly being seen as an effective means to deal with challenges to food security, energy security, water security, environment security, health security and human security. ”

- H.E. Indra Mani Pandey, Secretary General, BIMSTEC

“ In a region characterised by geopolitical asymmetries, rules-based governance provides a critical mechanism for ensuring that smaller states are not marginalised in shaping the future of the ocean space. ”

- H.E. SHU Dissanayake, Additional Secretary for Ocean Affairs, Environment & Climate and Consular Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka

“ The security implications of climate change are considered important, but not treated as a matter of priority. We must evaluate whether climate cooperation truly is a low-hanging fruit in South Asia, as it is often assumed to be - and if it is not, how it may be prioritised so we are better prepared for the future. ”

- Vice Admiral Biswajit Dasgupta (Retd),
National Maritime Security Coordinator, GoI

“ Effective climate cooperation in South Asia requires bridging fragmented governance while balancing national priorities with the region's shared vulnerabilities. ”

- Dr. Dhanasree Jayaram, Senior Assistant Professor,
Geopolitics and International Relations, MAHE, Manipal

Introduction

IPCS hosted a Track 1.5 Workshop on Climate Change and Geopolitics in South Asia on 4-6 May 2026 in Kochi, Kerala, India, as part of its ongoing project, with the Clingendael Institute, on the security implications of climate change in Southern Asia. The workshop was focused on developing an understanding of how climate change interacts with geopolitics and shapes regional priorities in South Asia. It convened varied expertise from across the region to discuss these intersections.

Background

South Asia is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions. It has seen a sharp rise in extreme weather events and faces severe heat, glacial melt, flash floods, rising sea levels, and drought. In a resource-scarce, densely populated region, such climatic factors exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and threaten livelihoods and security.

By their nature, regional climate threats are interlinked, transboundary issues. This understanding drives the regional consensus that climate change is a pressing issue that needs more than national solutions. However, converting collective goodwill into actual measures is a challenge. While climate and geopolitical risk intensification may be visible to regional stakeholders, their cascading effects are often unclear until a crisis takes place. This limited visibility creates challenges for anticipating risks and places greater demands on regional climate governance. In addition, socio-political tensions have hindered cooperation in South Asia—climate impacts, similarly, aren't immune to this challenge. In a heavily securitised region, concerns around issues like sovereignty, border security, information sensitivity, etc, inform climate diplomacy as well.

Climate cooperation in South Asia thus represents a unique paradox: acknowledged as urgent, but yet to be prioritised for collective action. This report captures the conversations IPCS facilitated in Kochi, between a select group of diverse experts from across South Asia—from academia and policy, to diplomacy, to the military. The report's findings highlight the challenges South Asia faces in collectively addressing the impacts of climate change.

Methodology

The workshop took a two-stage approach. The first stage brought the participants together virtually on 3 March 2026, with the objective of helping define the agenda for the May 2026 Kochi workshop through shared ownership. The virtual discussion identified regional climate information-sharing as priority within the gamut of issues that comprise climate cooperation.

Subsequently, IPCS designed the in-person meeting around a two-day exercise that simulated a regional forum on climate data-sharing, to explore the challenges to and pathways available for regional cooperation. This report's examination of participant perspectives and role-playing behaviours during the simulation exercise is the principal methodology used to evaluate how future regional climate security institutions could be designed, and how they might effectively function under crisis conditions.

The first part of the simulation assumed a *carte blanche* political mandate to negotiate and draft a charter for a new regional organisation, preliminarily named as the 'South Asia Climate Intelligence Centre (SACIC)'. The second part tested the efficacy of the newly formed organisation and its Charter through a compound climate disaster that compelled the region to act together in addressing the crisis.

Nine Observations from Kochi for South Asian Decision-Makers

Any design intended to achieve climate cooperation in South Asia must recognise the following regional realities:

#1 Climate policy is a national enterprise

Workshop discussions highlighted that in South Asia, climate change policy as well as any discourse on the security implications of climate impacts are typically viewed at a national level. An awareness of the need for collective, transboundary solutions, while worthwhile, hasn't yet amounted to group action or informed governance.

#2 Governance silos reinforce fragmentation

An additional obstacle is domestic and structural. All countries in the region—with the exception of island states for whom climate change is an existential threat—organise climate policy in distinct governance silos such as development and HA/DR. An agriculture ministry will necessarily have a different view from a defence ministry. These governance silos also create knowledge gaps by selectively framing climate risks primarily as extreme weather events and natural disasters, which makes their interconnected social, economic, and security dimensions less visible.

#3 Divergent national priorities produce different expectations of regional cooperation

A recognition of the relationship between climate change and regional security hasn't translated into South Asia-wide consensus on its implications or priorities for cooperation. Domestic and regional siloed approaches naturally create different national priorities. In turn, it can lead to varying expectations of climate cooperation. The workshop simulation exercise found that island states, driven by greater urgency, may demand a broader mandate than climate data-sharing for a hypothetical regional organisation. Other perspectives proposed restricting such an organisation's function to climate data collation, viewing its mandate from the lens of what might be politically feasible in a region as divisive as South Asia, rather than what might be necessary. The region is shaped by significant asymmetries in terms of climate vulnerability, resources, and response capabilities. Asymmetric experiences of climate risks generate competing threat perceptions, priorities, and expectations.

#4 Global geopolitical tensions underpin the necessity of regional climate cooperation

As the international order grows unpredictable and its multilateral institutions weaken, regions like South Asia have a stronger impetus to organise themselves against larger shocks. With climate change posing a shared threat, cooperation to address its impacts is often assumed to encounter less political resistance than other issues on the South Asian regional political agenda. The fact of global multilateral governance being under threat could be used to galvanise this assumption into action.

#5 Climate agendas are shaped by the same sensitivities that limit other regional engagements

The Kochi workshop tested the long-held assumption that climate change is the path of least political resistance for regional cooperation. The discussions, however, revealed that even climate change can trigger the sensitive national concerns that have long deadlocked progress through cooperation in South Asia. For example, at the workshop, the issue of sovereignty frequently emerged in the conversation on climate data-sharing, and sensitivities around border management came up while proposing community-centric outreach. Persistent tensions make a common

regional plan harder to deliver despite shared concerns. This is why, in South Asia, even pursuing the ostensibly lowest hanging fruit of cooperation continues to be a significant challenge.

#6 South Asia's regional identity is an ongoing contestation

A sense of regional identity precedes successful regional cooperation, and the Kochi discussions indicated that South Asian regionalism remains underdeveloped in this regard. Divergences emerged over foundational questions, including what constitutes South Asia and which of its members should form an organisation to represent the region's climate security issues. The debate ranged from proposals for SACIC to mirror traditional SAARC membership to the eventual adoption of a SAARC+ formulation that included Myanmar—an outcome that reflected the diplomatic stalemates of the real world.

#7 Ideas for regional cooperation presume failure

In South Asia, political feasibility is frequently privileged over more ambitious, needs-based approaches, which reveals low expectations of what regional cooperation can realistically achieve. For example, certain issues that were initially frontrunners in the workshop conversation, such as migration and climate intelligence-sharing, were determined to be politically contentious for inclusion within SACIC's scope. Language and framing played an important role, such that the South Asia Climate Intelligence Centre (SACIC) later morphed into the South Asia Climate Information Forum (SACIF). The simulation also demonstrated a tendency to favour lower-risk, technocratic forms of cooperation over a broader operational mandate that could involve real-time politico-military coordination. The compromise reflected in the organisational mandate speaks to a fundamental paradox in South Asian climate diplomacy: a regional platform is considered politically sustainable only if it surrenders the functions that might make it genuinely useful, particularly to those most vulnerable to climate change.

#8 Existing path dependencies can limit innovative regional climate governance

While it is standard to borrow from existing templates to develop new ideas, this may actually prove to be counter-productive in the case of South Asian climate cooperation. During the workshop simulation, the Charter of the hypothetical regional organisation, SACIC, was adapted from relatively successful, real-world regional models—specifically BIMSTEC—despite the organisation's different mandate, objectives, and most importantly, geographic scope. When SACIC and its Charter were tested by a crisis in the second phase of the simulation, the design revealed functional limitations. There is no doubt that existing institutional pathways from other parts of the world hold important lessons. Ultimately, however, effective regional responses must be sensitive to South Asia's unique climate and governance requirements.

#9 Existing decision-making models are inadequate

The failure of pathways to cooperation in South Asia can be attributed, in part, to the decision-making mandates of regional platforms. Learning from this experience, the predominant 'consensus model' was firmly rejected in favour of a majority voting model during the workshop simulation exercise. This choice reflected two things: a creative solution that demonstrated a genuine desire to make regionalism work, and an open admission that the consensus model has long paralysed decision-making and progress. The discussions also highlighted that bottom-up approaches, including community-led climate risk initiatives and indigenous mitigation and adaptation efforts, must find equal footing alongside top-down national policy planning.

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